



# Indelible

This Theravada Buddhist monk of Wat Bang Phra in Thailand has a sacred Mongkut Phra Puttha Chao yantra tattooed on his head, believed to impart prosperity, protection, and luck. Photograph by Lars Krutak.

# Grace

## IN ASIA, TATTOOING TRADITIONS ABIDE AS BOTH PRAYER AND PROTECTION

For centuries, if not millennia, tattooists working across Asia have marked human skin with powerful designs and symbols in their quest to render the body everlasting, invincible, and sacred. From the sanctuaries of Thai tattoo masters (*ajarns*) to the deepest jungles of animistic Siberut and Borneo, tattooing reveals the distant places where real power lies and offers a lasting statement on the meaning of ritual, spirituality, and being human.

But these timeworn traditions are rapidly vanishing. For fifteen years I have traveled across Asia to meet and photograph tattooists and tattoo bearers in order to learn about this cultural heritage and the religious beliefs behind it. These encounters have left a lasting impression on me, compelling me to rethink how tattoos have been used to navigate the often unpredictable and imperfect world we live in. At the exhibition opening of *Sacred Realm: Blessings & Good Fortune Across Asia* at the Museum of International Folk Art, many of these stories and photographic images appeared in public for the first time.

### MAGICAL TATTOOS OF THAILAND

Ajarn Matthieu Duquenois sits beside an elaborate altar in Hua Hin, a coastal Thai town 120 miles southwest of Bangkok, where he has lived for the last two years. The altar features numerous Buddha statues, charmed amulets, and masks of the sage Pho Kae (Old Father), the wise hermit who is believed to

have begun the tradition of magical tattooing, or *sak yan*, in Thailand more than one thousand years ago. Duquenois's client soon approaches on his knees and provides an offering and donation of money placed on a platter. Raising the tray above his head, the disciple now presents it to the master, who blesses it. Duquenois lights an incense bundle to summon the spirits of past tattoo masters in his lineage, and then he blesses his elongated tattooing needle before plunging it into his client's skin.

For nearly a decade, French-born Duquenois has studied the magico-religious culture of *sak yan* and the *yantras* (sacred or magic designs) that complete it. Visiting private sanctuaries where these hallowed tattoo rituals take place, he learned the rituals of Thailand's most esteemed tattoo masters by apprenticing under many, becoming the second Westerner to bear the title of *ajarn* himself.

Ajarn Matthieu's magical tattoo adventure began in 2009, when he received his first *sak yan* at the age of thirty-seven. "I was facing a difficult time in my life and needed something spiritually to move forward," he said. "I became a Buddhist monk for a time, then I began visiting several *ajarns* across Thailand, and I participated in different magical rituals. Eventually, I was tattooed by 25 of the 200 masters I met, and suddenly *sak yan* became my passion, my obsession."

*Sak yan*, which literally means "to tattoo a sacred (or magic) design," is a significant part of religious life in Thailand. Inte-



grated into a system of belief encompassing Hinduism, animism, ancestor worship, and Theravada Buddhism that emphasizes strict personal meditation and the monastic path to enlightenment, sak yan evolved into a kind of magical literature written on the body. Tattoo disciples shield themselves with sak yan as they journey through an earthly existence dominated by human enemies, deities, spirits, and the dead.

Largely administered by holy monks or former holy men, the esoteric art is not only believed to provide its wearers with indelible protection from a variety of misfortunes, but also the mystical power to influence other people's behavior, carry the deceased safely into the afterlife, or simply increase a person's luck.

Before becoming tattoo masters, apprentices first study for long periods under an older mentor. Once the student has fully absorbed the master's magical knowledge, a transfer ceremony takes place, and the newly ordained ajarn takes his place in the lineage of sacred tattoo practitioners.

But according to Duquenois, these incredible traditions are in danger of vanishing. "Indeed, sak yan is gaining in popularity and can easily be machined at a rapid rate. But genuine Thai magical tattooing with full traditional ritual is slowly disappearing as the elder masters pass away. Although there are new tattoo artists practicing now, very few of them totally dedicate themselves to the tradition, learn the requirements, and respect the lineage."

Duquenois does not consider himself an artist in the Western sense of the word. Instead, he views tattooing as a ritual medium through which personal growth is transmitted.

"My credo is to listen to people's needs, sometimes their distresses, and try to temper or balance them with the proper yantras to complete them. In my view, the meaning of sak yan is to try to help devotees reach their life goals through the power of their tattoos. Sak yan often takes people down paths they

never even suspected or expected. The animist roots of sak yan really attract me, and I can feel a deep and ancient force in these tattoos. . . . They are not art to me."

In order to keep the spirit of sak yan alive, Ajarn Matthieu and his wife are building the first tattoo museum in Thailand. Their goal is to help preserve the rich cultural and religious heritage of sak yan for future generations of students and disciples.

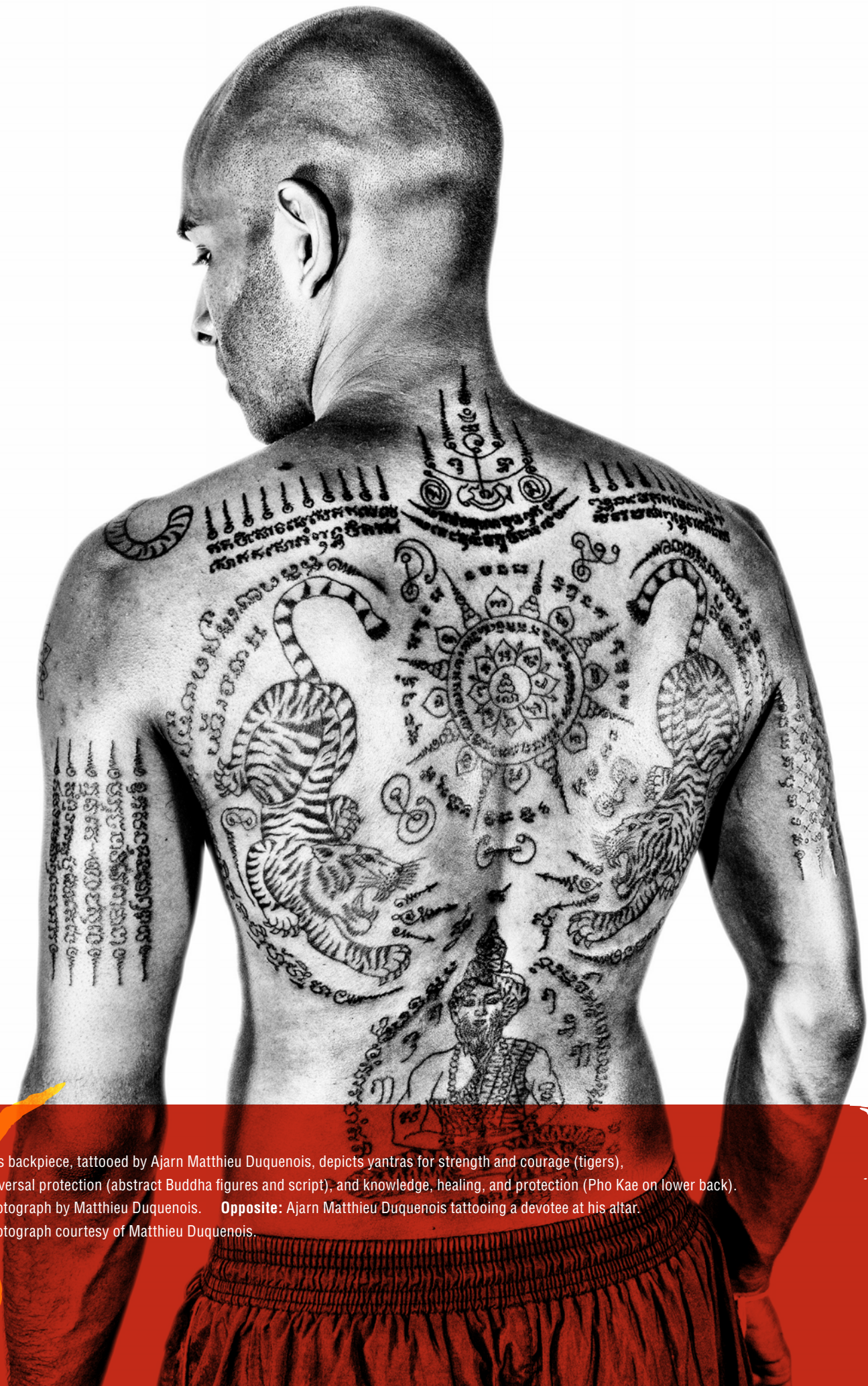
"The museum project here in Hua Hin came out as an urgent necessity to save and protect vanishing tools and objects related to Thai sacred tattoos, but also those from Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, because all of these tattooing traditions share the same roots." By the end of the year, Duquenois says that the collection will hold up to 700 pieces, including bronze tattoo weights, different types of ancient needle tips, wooden stamp blocks, ink pots, magical ingredients, books of spells, and lots of other accessories. He is allocating 80 percent of his tattooing profits to purchase as many of these objects as possible "before they vanish completely."

## MECCA OF THAI TATTOO

Some thirty miles northwest of Bangkok, the Theravada Buddhist monastery and temple complex known as Wat Bang Phra is the epicenter of magic tattoos in Thailand. Every year, Wat Bang Phra hosts the largest tattoo festival in the country. During the four-day event, usually held at the beginning of March, thousands of faithful tattoo devotees from all corners of Thailand (and a smattering of Westerners) come to receive new tattoos or have their old ones repowered by the blessed monks living here. The event also caters to families and has the atmosphere of a giant carnival. Circus rides, gaming tents, sound stages, food stalls, and amulet stands await visitors.

Generally speaking, two classes of tattoos can be received at Wat Bang Phra: those that act on others, causing them to like or fear the bearer; and tattoos that act on the bearer, instilling courage in them or creating a protective barrier around them. This category is believed to protect the body from animal bites, knife and bullet wounds, and fire.

The monks tattoo people in many different temples and in different settings. Some of the temples are topped with golden spires and display elaborately carved and brightly painted wooden roof gables and bargeboards, while others are plain concrete edifices that lack any kind of ornamentation. Some of the monks work on porches outside of their temple, while others prefer the dank, dark corners inside. Some share a room with other tattooists; others prefer to work alone.



This backpiece, tattooed by Ajarn Matthieu Duquenois, depicts yantras for strength and courage (tigers), universal protection (abstract Buddha figures and script), and knowledge, healing, and protection (Pho Kae on lower back). Photograph by Matthieu Duquenois. **Opposite:** Ajarn Matthieu Duquenois tattooing a devotee at his altar. Photograph courtesy of Matthieu Duquenois.



Mentawai shaman Aman Lau Lau of the Butui clan beautifies himself every day as part of his spiritual practice.

**Opposite:** Mentawai tattooist Aman Bereta hand-taps the thigh of Aman Ipai on the veranda of his longhouse. Hand-tapping is a traditional tattooing technique, along with hand-poking, skin-stitching, and scarification. Photographs by Lars Krutak.

The inks that the monks use are personal recipes; some are thought to have special qualities due to their unusual and magical ingredients. For example, some ajarns use charred and ground sandalwood, steeped in herbs or white sesame oil to impart protection. Liquids extracted from wild animals, such as the bile of tigers and bears, and even cobra venom, are mixed into ink for empowerment.

One monk mentioned that the exfoliated skin of a revered ajarn was added to Chinese ink mixed with holy water to make his tattoo pigment. This ink is believed to imbue the tattooed with qualities that engender reverence and respect in the people they interact with—as the monk would be treated.

One of the most gifted ajarns of Wat Bang Phra is Luang Pi Nunn. Although I had limited contact with him, he told me that in order to really understand the power of the magic tattoo, I needed to identify with the people who wore them: “You can’t learn about them from books,” he said. “Many people come here for magic tattoos. And they use their faith in the Buddha because he is an idol of goodness. He compels everyone to do only good things. You have to have faith for it [the tattoo] to work. You have to believe in it.” It’s also about more than the individual. “You need to understand *dharma*—or good behavior—before you get a tattoo. Simple things like cleaning the floor with a broom or washing clothes by hand can be an easy way to practice it. Actions like this focus the mind on doing good to help society, and these actions build a pure heart.”

## SPIRIT TATTOOS OF THE MENTAWAI

One thousand miles southwest of Wat Bang Phra lies isolated Siberut Island, Indonesia. Siberut, some sixty miles west of Padang, Sumatra, is part of the Mentawai Archipelago and home to the Mentawai people, one of the most profusely tattooed indigenous people living today.

Traditionally, tattoos were applied by a designated tattooist, usually a shaman (*sikerei*, “one who has magic power”), at specific stages in life. But with missionary activity beginning in the nineteenth century and aggressive government campaigns launched in the 1950s to modernize the Mentawai, cultural practices like tattooing were largely forbidden and gradually abandoned. Today, only a handful of clan members living in remote interior communities bear the tattoos of their ancestors.

The religious beliefs of the Mentawai are centered on keeping the human soul in balance or harmony with the spirits that govern their world. Continual care for one’s soul is a guiding principle in life, and one way to keep it “close” is by beautifying



the body. Men and women who neglect their bodies by not sharpening their teeth and adorning themselves with tattoos, beads, and flowers will cease to be attractive to their soul. In such cases the soul may decide to leave its human host and roam nearby and perhaps never return, deciding to withdraw to the ancestral world. If that happens, it is believed that the person will die as a result.

Mentawai shamans like Aman Lau Lau and Aman Bereta are experts at beautifying themselves. Aman Lau Lau said, “I decorate my face every day to look like a Mentawai shaman. My teeth are sharpened for the same reason. See how sharp they are? It’s an ancient shamanic tradition.”

Almost every day, they wear flowers in their hair, beads on their necks and wrists, and a strip of facial paint down their nose, and smear their bodies with fragrant ground turmeric.

Mentawai tattooing fulfills other functions. Several Mentawai shamans stated that their ancestors would only be able to recognize them in the afterlife because of their tattooing. Other *sikerei* reported that their spirit guides would not recognize them without a full complement of body tattooing. Some men wear crucifix-like crab tattoos on their forearms. Crabs are invoked by Mentawai shamans during healing and other rites because they are believed to live forever; they can discard their old exoskeletons and obtain new ones, or regenerate severed limbs.

Mentawai tattoos can also distinguish people regionally, a kind of zip code on the skin’s surface. The Mentawai of Butui are able to discern which community a man or woman is from on Siberut depending on the subtle variations of their body marks.

In other regions of Siberut, the intricate body tattoos of particular clans are said to represent the Tree of Life, or sago palm, from which the Mentawai’s staple foods are produced. For example, the stripes on the upper thighs of men represent the veins and trunk of the sago; long, dotted lines running down the arms symbolize the prickly fronds of its branches; patterns on the hands and ankles may mirror the bark or roots; and the curved lines on the chest represent the sago flower.



Some Mentawai elders have said that the Tree of Life must be tattooed on every shaman, because there can be no death when one is part of a tree of life.

The Mentawai of Butui told me that their tattoos do not necessarily depict the Tree of Life. For example, the barbed tattoos running down their arms

represent the thorny fronds of the rattan palm. Small marks tattooed on men's inner thighs and the tops of the feet, resembling chicken's feet, are in fact representations of dog's paws, a kind of sympathetic magic that enables the men to run as fast as their hunting companions. Rosettes tattooed on the shoulders of men and women symbolize the power of the tattoo to make evil bounce off their bodies like raindrops from a flower. And the intricate bead tattoos that appear on the chest, wrists, and back of the hands symbolically tie in the soul and keep it close to the body.

But the shamans of Butui are concerned about the future of the Mentawai tattoo. Aman Bereta, the clan's tattooist, says there are not many practicing tattoo artists working on Siberut today. He is not fully tattooed because no one in his community can properly tattoo him. Moreover, he cannot find apprentices who have the talent or patience to learn the traditional tattooing techniques from him.

Aman Bereta is also worried about the increasing numbers of untattooed shamans. He explained: "Tattoos give you the look of an ideal Mentawaiian. A tattooed body is rich and keeps the spirit close. But for the unmarked shamans living here, that is a different story. Their spirits are far from them because they have no tattoos."

I asked a few younger, unmarked Mentawai shamans why they were not tattooed. Some noted that a full body suit was too expensive, costing one medium-sized pig, several sago or coconut palm trees, and many chickens. Others complained that it was too painful or might negatively affect their chances to find work in coastal settlements. After all, Indonesia is an

Islamic country, and tattooing is largely taboo there because of its associations with religious impurity and criminality.

"The younger generation no longer want to get their bodies tattooed," said Aman Lau Lau. "They've traveled to the end of the river, and they've seen people wearing T-shirts, shoes, and modern clothes. And they want a modern lifestyle, too. So they are leaving our tattoos behind."

## THE TATTOOS OF BORNEO

Unlike tattoo practitioners in Thailand and Siberut, most of the indigenous tattooers living on the island of Borneo are female, including those of the Kayan and Kenyah people. But these artisans have not practiced in decades; missionaries compelled them to discard these cultural practices in the 1950s. Nevertheless, several tattooed female elders recounted their experiences and described the elaborate ceremonial attached to this ancient tradition.

Before tattooing among the Kayan was eliminated, women believed that tattoo designs acted as torches after death, leading them through the darkness of the afterlife to the longhouses of their beloved ancestors.

Kayan and Kenyah tattooing was largely female-centric, although male warriors were tattooed, and the process was a long and painful one, sometimes lasting as much as four years. Only small patches of skin could be tattooed in one sitting, and several long intervals elapsed between the various stages of work.

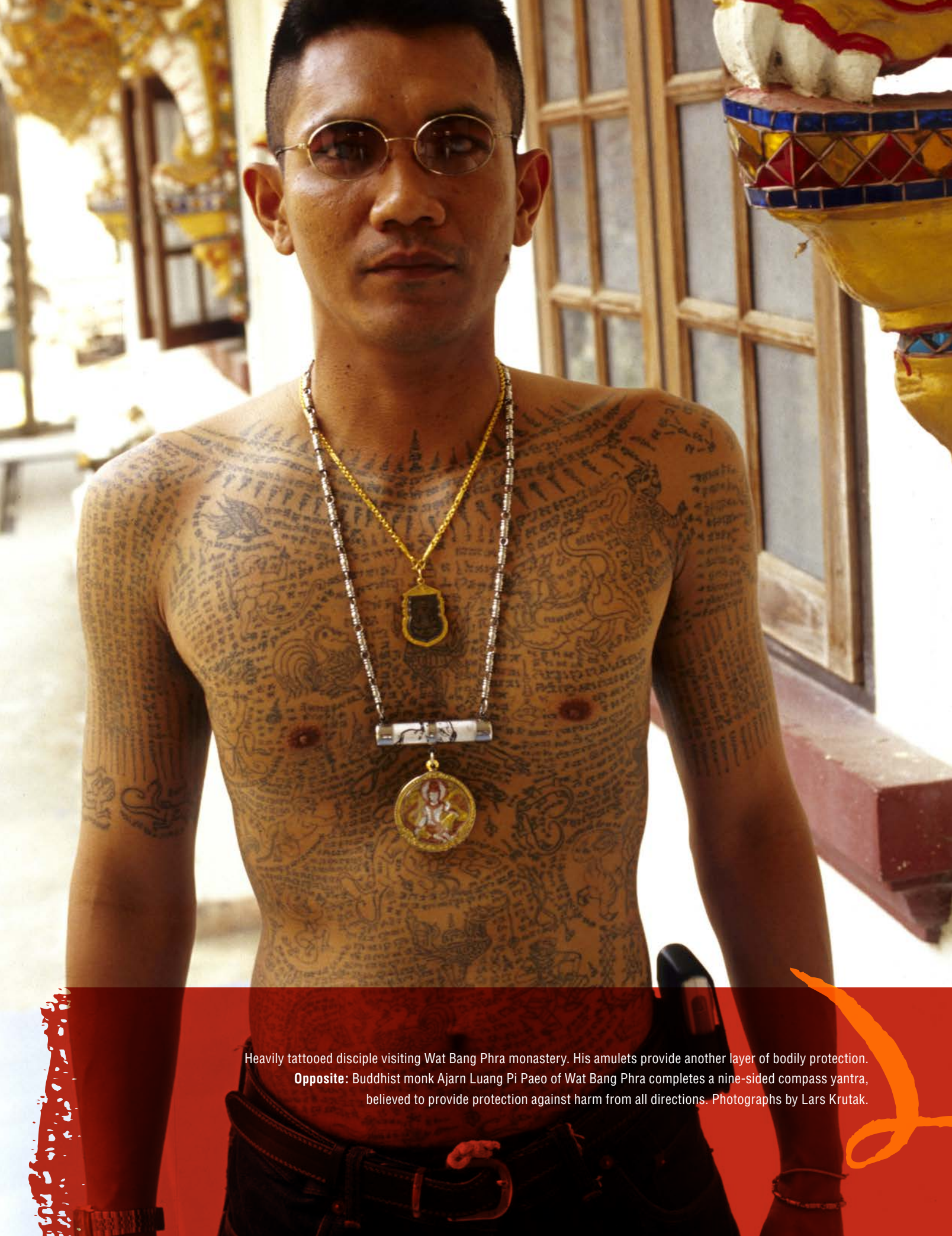
Several elders also explained the implications of flowing blood. "It attracted evil spirits," said former Kayan tattooist Ping Saram. "So there were prohibitions to regulate this." For instance girls could not be tattooed during menstruation.

A Kayan girl received her first tattoos when she was about ten years old. Her fingers and the upper part of her feet were tattooed first, and then about a year later her forearms were tattooed. The thighs were partially tattooed during the next year, and in her third or fourth year, all the tattooing was completed.

Most Kayan tattooists were restricted by social taboos. For example, a woman couldn't tattoo during rice-seeding time or if a dead person was lying unburied in the community; it was taboo to let blood under these circumstances for fear of disturbing the ritual harmony of the household. Tattooists were also forbidden from eating certain foods like raw and bloody meat or fish, because evil spirits might enter the food and possess the artist. It was believed that if an artist disregarded any of these prohibitions, the designs that she tattooed would



The ritual of Long Kong is performed by tattoo masters on special occasions to test the power of the tattoo in front of an assembly. Here, the famous tattooist Ajarn Toy of Bangkok wears a Pho Kae mask and attempts to cut Ajarn Daniel Duquenois's skin. Photograph courtesy of Matthieu Duquenois. **Opposite:** Kenyah aristocrat Lerin Lasa of Uma Bahak displays lukut bead tattoos on her knuckles. Photograph by Lars Krutak.



Heavily tattooed disciple visiting Wat Bang Phra monastery. His amulets provide another layer of bodily protection.

**Opposite:** Buddhist monk Ajarn Luang Pi Paeo of Wat Bang Phra completes a nine-sided compass yantra, believed to provide protection against harm from all directions. Photographs by Lars Krutak.

not appear clearly, and she herself would sicken and die. Sometimes women became tattoo artists in order to become cured of particular illnesses, since the tutelary spirits of tattoo artists protected them from disease-bearing spirits.

“Kayan tattooists worked under the tutelage and protection of two spirits, Bua Kalung and her daughter, Lahay Bua,” said Hunyang Lisang, a female Kayan priest, or *dayong*. “They were invoked before any new tattoo pattern was initiated for a female client. The prayer announced to the spirit the particular design that was to be applied and asked for the client to feel little pain and the tattooist to make beautiful designs.”

However, the invocation differed depending upon the social status of the tattoo client, because women could only wear specific designs appropriate to their social class. For example, if the client was of the highest Kayan social class (*maren*), a *dayong* prayed to Bua Kalung. The client had the right to be tattooed with evil-averting patterns reserved for nobility, including those of the dragon-dog and hornbill; someone of a lower class was allowed to wear patterns of apotropaic tuba root and decorative fern.

Upon completion of the tattoo, a *dayong* recited another ritual prayer to the female spirits. “This invocation is uttered so that no harm would come to the tattoo client, since her bloody wounds could perhaps attract a lurking evil spirit,” Lisang explained.

Indigenous Kenyah women, like their Kayan neighbors, were extensively tattooed on their hands, arms, feet, and legs. One of the most powerful Kenyah tattoo motifs was the *lukut*, or bead design, resembling a starburst or star. This powerful tattoo was worn on the knuckles, wrists, or forearms and was believed to keep the soul from wandering away from its human host, like the bead tattoos worn by the Mentawai.

The origin of this tattoo motif among the Kayan is the stuff of legends. Long ago, when a man fell ill, it was supposed that his soul had escaped from his body, and his recovery was attributed to the return of his lost soul. To prevent the soul’s departure in the future, the man tied it in by fastening around his wrist a piece of string threaded with a *lukut*, where magic was considered to reside. Because the string could have become broken and the bead lost, the Kayan replaced it with a tattooed bead motif that has come to be regarded as a charm to ward off all disease.

Today, only a handful of Kayan and Kenyah tattoo artists remain. None of the tattooed women I met were under seventy years of age, and unless a tattoo revival is ignited in the near future, these marks of identity will soon disappear forever.



“My grandparents told me that tattoos were equipment for the afterlife, so that our ancestors could distinguish our social class and identity,” explained Avok Avun, a tattooed Kayan elder. “But these traditions will fade away after my generation passes.”

### SPIRITUAL SKIN

The magic and spirituality inherent in giving and receiving traditional tattoos is an important part of Asian cultural heritage. Carried through life and into death, these potent marks can never be taken away and testify to an ancestral legacy that defines local perceptions of existence and well-being.

Indeed, tattoos tell us so very much about individuals and their unique cultures—and what it is to be human. But with the commercialization of tattooing in Thailand, the effects of globalization on the Mentawai, and missionary ambitions in Borneo, tattooing has been adversely impacted to the point where this ancient custom is now on the verge of extinction.

It is my hope, however, that Duquenois’s efforts to preserve the history, rituals, and meanings of Thai magical tattooing will be part of a movement that enables it to survive into the future. I also hope that my photographic images exhibited in *Sacred Realm* will provide another avenue for tattoo-heritage conservation. After all, I feel that the study of ancient tattooing culture offers one of the most profound biographical, artistic, and intellectual statements on the importance of cultural diversity, human experience, and visual communication. And this knowledge should be shared to the benefit of all communities. ■

**Lars Krutak** is an anthropologist at the Indian Arts and Crafts Board and Research Associate in the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History. He is the author of *Tattoo Traditions of Native North America: Ancient and Contemporary Expressions of Identity* (LM Publishers, 2014) among other works on the subject. Krutak will give a lecture and do a book signing at the Museum of International Folk Art on June 5, 2016, from 2 to 4 p.m.